

Feeling Burned Out? You May Be Suffering from Adrenal Fatigue

Are you an anxious over-achiever? If so, you have something else to worry about – *adrenal fatigue*. Adrenal fatigue occurs when the adrenal glands, positioned on top of the kidneys, produce too much or too little stress hormones (including cortisol and adrenaline) due to long-term exposure and response to stress. That being said, *adrenal fatigue* is admittedly a bit of a misnomer. That's because it is actually the brain that signals the adrenal glands, which fatigues. Regardless, the result is the same – neuroendocrine imbalance.



As a result, you may feel anxious and irritable or burned out and depressed. Or you might alternate from one state to another as your adrenal glands sputter and spit in an attempt to keep you going.

Unfortunately, conventional medicine refuses to accept adrenal fatigue as an illness. It recognizes only two adrenal diseases:

- Addison's Disease (low cortisol), also referred to as adrenal insufficiency, which typically results from an autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks the adrenal glands
- Cushing's Syndrome (high cortisol), caused by a tumor on the pituitary gland that makes the pituitary gland secrete excess ACTH, stimulating the adrenal gland to make more cortisol

Each of these conditions are serious, rare and requires immediate medical attention. However, high or low cortisol in the absence of adrenal disease can cause fatigue, body aches, and a host of other symptoms commonly observed in clinical practice. Clusters of these symptoms are what clinicians often diagnose as adrenal fatigue.

Defining "Stress"

In the context of adrenal fatigue, stress is anything that triggers the adrenal gland to produce and release stress hormones, including:

- Fear, which causes worry or triggers the fight-or-flight response
- Physical injuries or chronic pain
- Diets that include an overabundance of carbohydrates, sugar, or caffeine
- Heavy use or addiction to alcohol and other mind-altering substances
- Chronic infections from such illnesses as Epstein Barr, herpes, H-Pylori, and Lyme disease
- Environmental toxins including heavy metals, toxic mold, endocrine disruptors in plastics, and chemicals in a variety of household and personal care products
- Restless sleep, tossing and turning all night, or worse – waking up and not being able to fall back asleep

- Life's situational stressors, including the loss of a job or demotion, separation or divorce, severe injury or the death of a close family member or friend

As long as you are subject to stress, your adrenal glands operate in stress mode. And that stress takes a toll on the adrenal glands, which varies according to the number of stressors and their intensity and duration.

Maintaining a Healthy Endocrine System

Keep in mind that the adrenal glands are just one part of the endocrine system, which includes the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, thyroid, parathyroids, adrenal glands, pineal body, reproductive glands, and pancreas. Dysfunction in one part of the endocrine system can cause dysfunction in another. For example, excess cortisol from the adrenals can interfere with the conversion of thyroid hormone into its active form, thereby slowing metabolism. By assessing and balancing cortisol levels, a patient suffering with hypothyroid often starts to feel better.

The Difference Between Adrenaline and Cortisol

Although adrenaline (epinephrine) and cortisol (hydrocortisone), are both stress hormones, they play very different roles. In the case of adrenaline, that role includes an increase in respiration, heart rate, and muscle contractions.

Cortisol on the other hand, acts on the liver, fat cells, and the pancreas to increase glucose levels that provide energy for muscles. Cortisol can also inhibit certain bodily functions for a short time, including digestion, growth, reproduction, and the immune response.

Symptoms of adrenal fatigue include an increased secretion of

stress hormones that are designed to give the body a temporary surge in energy and strength to avoid a dangerous event. Chronic stress leads to high levels of stress hormones that can last only as long as the adrenal glands are able to keep pace – followed, of course by insufficient levels as the adrenal glands run out of steam.

Since experiencing too much or too little adrenaline is rare, the focus on adrenal fatigue must turn to cortisol levels. Below are some of the symptoms of high cortisol:

- Fatigue
- High blood pressure
- Pain in the back
- Thin skin
- Mood swings, anxiety, or irritability
- Noticeable weight gain around the stomach and upper back, the face, and the base of the neck
- Restless sleep
- Abnormal blood sugar readings
- Swelling of the hands or feet
- Increased facial hair on women or female balding
- Menstrual abnormalities
- Weak muscles
- Decline in bone mineral density
- Trouble paying attention, poor concentration
- Low libido
- Skin blemishes and acne
- Easy bruising
- Memory issues

Symptoms of low cortisol include:

- Anxiety
- Fainting, lightheadedness
- Weakness

- Hypoglycemia
- Fatigue/trouble sleeping
- Increased heart rate
- Low blood pressure
- Swelling
- Muscle pain
- Joint pain
- Headaches
- Dizziness upon rising suddenly
- Aching stomach
- Lack of interest in things around you
- Impaired concentration or memory
- Confusion
- Cravings for salt
- Sore throat

A patient will come in after suffering a traumatic event, such as breakup or a job loss, or a lengthy, ongoing situation such as caring for a parent, or dealing with a close relative with a drinking or substance abuse problem, or a financial nightmare with no resolution in the immediate future.

These patients tell us about the weight gain attributed to excess cortisol production, and now they suffer with anxiety, poor sleep, and exhaustion. Some have high blood pressure, while others show symptoms of low cortisol— including low blood pressure— primarily due to adrenal glands having produced high levels of cortisol for a long period of time.

Adrenal Fatigue Diagnosis



Adrenal fatigue (high or low cortisol) is high on the list of missed diagnoses we see. Most endocrinologists and primary care physicians only treat the symptoms of adrenal fatigue, depending on anti-anxiety medication or antidepressants. And while the patient might experience some relief, that symptomatic feeling is often temporary. In most cases, weight gain, feelings of exhaustion and restless sleep return, leaving the patient feeling even more helpless.

Our diagnosis comes about after we've carefully reviewed a patient's health history and after we've carefully listened to their issues. By examining the patient's past problems, as well as their current issues, we begin to understand the progression of adrenal fatigue. Following a thorough metabolic survey, we come up with a comprehensive checklist of adrenal symptoms that is immediately at hand on subsequent visits in order for us to accurately monitor progress.

Also of importance is a thorough physical examination where we look for such signs as dry skin, brittle fingernails, weight

gain in the stomach, and low or high blood pressure. Any of these symptoms can be a clue indicating a deficiency that can be related to high stress levels and/or inflammation. By performing lab tests that target salivary cortisol, we can pinpoint the problem and provide a successful treatment regimen.

Adrenal Fatigue Treatment

How do we treat our patients suffering from adrenal fatigue? The first step is to identify and then remove or reduce the stressors. That includes taking a close look at the stresses that trigger this sluggish ailment, including bad relationships, work issues, diet, poor health and even toxins in the air and food we breath or consume.

Armed with a variety of vitamins, minerals, adaptogenic herbs, and antioxidants, we can noticeably improve the health of the adrenal glands, enabling the body to regulate itself.

The result for many of our patients is noticeable improvement within days or weeks. Most say they feel more energetic, are sleeping better, and experience more optimism and gratitude while conducting their day-to-day dealings. And many realize that increased mobility and strength is the direct result of a program that includes adjusting activity levels, modifying their food intake, and disavowing the use of stimulants.

If you've read this post and have suffered any or most of the symptoms described, it could be in your best interest to schedule a preliminary visit with us here at BioDesign Wellness Center. We can provide you with an accurate diagnosis of your health issues and put you on the road to improved health and fitness.

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